



Peak Optimism

"I'm asking you to believe, not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington... I'm asking you to believe in yours."

Barrack Obama

"We're no longer staring into the abyss of defeat, and we can now look ahead to the genuine prospect of success."

John McCain

"Do not trust in princes, in mortal man, in whom there is no salvation."

Psalm 146:3

Do you believe the country is moving in the right direction? In the 30-plus years that the *Washington Post* has asked Americans this question, the percentage of respondents who say "yes" has never been lower. While the wealthy tend to be considerably more optimistic than the poor, the current overall figure of 14 percent is impressive—given a three-decade stretch that has given us the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, an energy crisis, two recessions, the Iran hostage crisis, and other reasons to despair. And while Democrats predictably assess the situation less positively than their partisan counterparts, only a quarter of all Republicans contend that the nation is on the right track.

Social scientists who make a living tracking the national mood typically observe upswings in election years as Americans sniff the hope of change. This year, however, the electorate seems considerably bleaker about the future. Voters may feel strongly about who the next president should be (as do I, by the way), but not with much expectation of substantive change.

Such record-setting, bipartisan gloom is probably disorienting for those accus-

tomed to labeling the disconcerted as unpatriotic and anti-American. Indeed, David Frum, the president's neoconservative speechwriter during the September 11th season, railed on fellow conservatives for doubting the nation's course, accusing them, essentially, of treason: "War is a great clarifier. It forces people to take sides. The paleoconservatives have chosen—and the rest of us must choose, too. In a time of danger, they have turned their backs on their country. Now we turn our backs on them." It makes one wonder what Frum's social circles look like these days, as the breadth of conservatives, let alone those "pessimistic liberals," find the state of the union deeply unsettling.

Optimism, of course, is a state of mind, a sense one has, perhaps despite the evidence, that everything will work out in the end. Optimism is a psychical resource afforded usually to those with resources at their disposal to control (or possess the illusion of controlling) their destiny. For example, I might feel optimistic about my future because of a reputable college degree, an excellent credit rating, financial reserves, friends in strategic places, and a generally healthy body. However, a sunny outlook dims considerably if I find myself in serious debt, alienated from my friends, threatened by enemies, and sick in body.

Now consider the psyche of a nation, ours in particular. Is the deep and resilient reservoir of American optimism finally drying up as supply is outpaced by the demand for answers? We face an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, a shrinking middle class, growing poverty, job loss, and rising prices. What happens when the usual suite of solutions—i.e. tax cuts, corporate subsidies, trade agreements, stimulus checks, troop surges, and endless defense spending—fail to deliver? And what if we discover that most of these "solutions" never really had the struggling class in mind to begin with?

Add to this the disheartening proliferation of reports about torture, detainee abuse, cronyism, profiteering, and public deception at the highest levels of government, and you have a formula for widespread, reality-based cynicism and despair. There are reasons very few of us like to imagine what life will be like for our children's children.

This should make us, as God's church, think seriously about the kind of hope we're embracing and upholding for our generation and the next. Do we actually trust in what Jesus tells us? Do we believe that greed actually does destroy the soul, even though it's legal, and that, contrary to popular opinion, sharing isn't scary? That violence is evil, even though the "American Way of Life" depends on its use? That life is found in people, not amusement? That living interdependently is more fundamentally human than the pursuit of individual desires and freedoms? Do the sinking sands of the American experiment expose the possibility that, despite all our pietistic fervor, we've been misplacing our hope all along?

The current wave of national pessimism may actually indicate that the unbelieving world "gets" this better than most of us evangelicals do. Pagans may not know the hope of a loving God, but do we demonstrate this any better? It seems we either join the groaning masses, or simply "hope for better times." But the body of Christ is bound not by cynicism or enticing-yet-shallow hopes for change. Our hope is in repentance, that is, the life in Christ found by those who turn from the false promises of a dying order. ■

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